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# * THE CULTURAL CONTEXT FOR THE PURSUIT OF VOCATION


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## Abstract

How does the cultural context influence the pursuit of vocation? How does culture influence the decisions that young people make about the life direction they pursue? This qualitative, ethnographic study was conducted to discover and describe the motivational influences in the lives of students and graduates of The Leadership Center, located in rural Honduras, as they traveled a journey through high school and on to The Leadership Center in pursuit of a vocation. The sample of study participants consisted of thirty young women, thirteen graduates, and seventeen students of The Leadership Center. While the culture of Honduras was not explicitly investigated in this study, facets of the culture of rural Honduras were mentioned by study participants more than any other topic. The culture of rural Honduras forms the context in which the pursuit of education and vocation takes place. Both the motivational influences driving study participants in the pursuit of education and vocation, as well as the barriers holding study participants and others back, have their roots within the culture of rural Honduras. Culture, as it turned out, is an essential contextual element when studying the pursuit of vocation. The literature contains very little about the influence culture has on the pursuit of vocation. One possible reason for this is that most of the research on vocation has been limited to predominately White subjects living in North America (Ryan D Duffy & Dik, 2013, p. 433). This lack of cultural and geographic diversity in the study of vocation "makes it impossible to know how calling is defined and functions" (p. 433) with individuals in other racial and ethnic groups, other cultures, and other countries. This study contributes to filling this gap through an understanding of the cultural context for the pursuit of vocation by young women living in rural Honduras.

## Research Overview

The setting for the ethnographic research study reported in this article is The Leadership Center (TLC), a tertiary-level educational institution located in rural Honduras. TLC is an educational project of Leadership Mission International (LMI), a 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization. The mission of LMI is "to educate, train, and develop a new generation of ethical leaders by providing exceptional academics and hands-on leadership opportunities to individuals from underprivileged families" (LMI, n.d.). TLC students are unmarried Honduran females who have graduated from high school and who do not have children. They study English, leadership, and community development. TLC administration is intentional about accepting qualified students who would not otherwise be able to continue their education at the university level due to lack of family resources. The Leadership Center is approved as a technical certification program by the National Commission for Informal Education (CONEANFO) – a branch of the Honduran National Department of Education. Upon completion of the two-year program of

study, students are granted a degree of "Formacion Bilingue en Liderazgo y Desarrollo Comunitario" (in English, Bilingual Formation in Leadership and Community Development).

Honduras, the second poorest country in Central America (CIA, 2018), has been the subject of much recent media coverage and political rhetoric. Thousands of Hondurans leave their homeland to make a difficult and dangerous trek across Guatemala and Mexico in the hope of reaching the border of the United States and being granted asylum. They flee a society characterized by "widespread poverty, fragmented families, and a lack of education and employment opportunities" (Meyer, 2018, p. 10). For women who live in rural Honduras, "the job market is almost non-existent" (Lomot, 2013, p. 21). Drugs, gangs, violence, pregnancy at a young age, and single mother-led households are a part of daily life for many in Honduras. Honduras embodies the typically patriarchal society, commonly referred to as machismo, that can be found throughout Latin America (Lomot, 2013; Rowlands, 1997).

Within such a society men make all the decisions: "the male population chooses when women become pregnant, how many children they have, what their daily chores are, and how far their education goes" (Lomot, p. 15). The machismo culture "encourages men to dominate women and to aggressively exercise power and control" (Giordano, Thumme, & Sierra, 2009, p. 997). Women are expected to fit into their gender role of "wife-mother-maintainer of the home," resulting in "women carrying the burden of domestic and reproductive labor" (Rowlands, p. 34). Teen pregnancy and large families are typical in rural Honduras (Lomot; Rowlands). Accompanying the problem of teen pregnancy, domestic violence has "become prevalent throughout much of the country" (Lomot, p. 24). Girls and women caught in this machismo culture struggle with issues of fear, low self-confidence, and low self-esteem (Lomot; Rowlands). Consequently, "many women do not enter the workforce because they feel they cannot perform adequately" (Lomot, p. 24); the rate of female participation in the labor force is consistently lower than other Latin American countries (pp. 22, 24 - 25). It is rare for a young person, male or female, raised within the culture of rural Honduras to pursue education and vocation.

Illiteracy is another common problem across Honduras, especially in rural areas. Most seventeen to twenty-two year old females in Honduras have completed an average of 4.1 years of education (Rose, 2012). The students who attend The Leadership Center fall into this demographic and age range. However, these students have far exceeded an average of 4.1 years of education; all have graduated from the secondary school since this is a requirement to attend The Leadership Center. The socioeconomic and cultural odds are all stacked against the young women who attend The Leadership Center. All have grown up in humble circumstances in under-resourced communities. Many come from non-traditional family situations. They overcame these odds to pursue higher education and a vocation. Why? What motivated these young women to pursue something that family and friends rarely, if ever, achieve? What drove these and other young women to defy the cultural norms of their communities and the historical patterns of their families to continue their education and to pursue a vocation in business, bilingual teaching, or serving with a non-governmental organization (NGO)? The ethnographic research study underlying this paper was designed to answer those questions.

This paper draws on two streams from the literature to analyze and describe the cultural context for the pursuit of vocation: (1) vocation and calling, and (2) culture.

## Precedent Literature

### Vocation and Calling

Theologians and philosophers have studied the concept of vocation, or calling, for more than twenty centuries (Placher, 2005). The concepts of calling and vocation emerge from the same Latin root word, "vocāre," which means to call or summons. Guinness (1998) notes that calling comes from an Anglo-Saxon root, while vocation comes from a Latin root (pp. 48-49). Placher (2005) points out that "'vocation' is just a Latin word for 'calling' – the two words are more or less interchangeable" (p. 1). Over time, these two constructs have been separated from their common root; some threads of the social science literature view them as distinct and separate constructs. However, this paper will follow the guidance of Guinness, who asserts that the two terms are synonymous (p. 48).

Vocation has been defined as "an approach to a particular life role that is oriented toward demonstrating or deriving a sense of purpose or meaningfulness and that holds other-oriented values and goals as primary sources of motivation" (Dik & Duffy, 2009, p. 428). Vocation has its historical roots in the Christian tradition and refers to that to which I am called as a human being, living all facets of my life before the face of God. The essence of the Christian perspective on vocation is to serve God and serve others in every sphere of life (Schuurman, 2004). Therefore, vocation encompasses all aspects of life – family, work, culture, church, volunteer activities, social relationships in the neighborhood and other settings, education, community service, responsibilities, and citizenship, both locally and globally (Garber, 2014, p. 11) – everything. What is a vocation? Vocation, from the perspective of the Christian tradition, is "ordinary people doing ordinary things in ordinary places" (Garber, p. 18) but doing so in a way and with a heart that integrates what is done into "the work of God in the world" (p. 144). Who we are and what we do, the very fabric of our lives becomes "integral to the missio Dei, not incidental to it" (p. 144). Vocation entails going about our daily lives and the activities that make up our daily lives, in such a way that we are serving God and serving others. Sherman (2011) advocates for such an all-encompassing vocation-centric lifestyle, labeling it "vocational stewardship," which she defines as "the intentional and strategic deployment of our vocational power-knowledge, platform, networks, position, influence, skills, and reputation – to advance foretastes of God's kingdom" (p. 20).

From the perspective of the Christian tradition, calling and vocation are synonymous. However, social scientists differentiate calling from vocation by including the presence of an external source in the definition of calling; the call originates beyond the self. In their research, Dik and Duffy (2009) found that the historical connection between calling and vocation no longer exists. The significant difference between these two concepts is the presence of an external source of the call. Vocation, as social scientists currently understand it, does not recognize the presence of an external caller while calling still includes the presence of the external caller. In contrast to calling, the construct of vocation incorporates "internal sources of motivation to approach a life role" (p. 428) with a sense of purpose and other-oriented goals and values.

Calling is defined as "a transcendent summons, experienced as originating beyond the self, to approach a particular life role in a manner oriented toward demonstrating or deriving a sense of purpose or meaningfulness and that holds other-oriented values and goals as primary sources of motivation" (Dik & Duffy, 2009, p. 427; 2012, p. 11). Warneke (2012) emphasizes the external source when he asserts that "A calling is a summons, which originates outside of

one's self, to serve a cause that betters humanity" (p. 12). Scott (2007) points out that the concept of calling holds the meaning "to call, to voice, or to vocalize" (p. 261). An external caller issues a call or summons to the receiver. This sense of an external summons comes through in the Muslim perspective on calling as well as the Christian perspective: "Human beings are summoned-some to do particular tasks, others more generally to a life of service" (Kelsay, 2016, p. 85). Dik and Duffy (2009) leave open the specific nature of this external source. God, the needs of society, or "serendipitous fate" are all possible sources (p. 427). As with the definition of a vocation, it is worth noting that a critical dimension of these definitions is the presence of other-oriented values and goals as a primary source of motivation.

Duffy and Dik (2013) point out that the starting point for most researchers is the neo-classical and modern definitions of calling. The neo-classical definition "emphasizes a sense of destiny and prosocial duty" while the modern definitions "generally focus on an inner drive toward self-fulfillment or personal happiness" (p. 429). These authors also note that the construct of calling as it relates to research in the realm of work consists of three major elements: (1) An external summons, with the source of the summons being a supreme being, family obligation, duty to country, or any other source external to the one being called, (2) an alignment to the individual's purpose or mission in life, and (3) a prosocial orientation; other-oriented goals and values (p. 429).

The source of calling is one of the most controversial issues in the calling literature (Ryan D. Duffy, Allan, Bott, & Dik, 2014). According to Duffy and his colleagues (2014), there are three prominent views on the source of calling: "(a) something or someone external, (b) destiny, or finding a career one is 'meant to do', and (c) finding an ideal match for one's interest, values, and skills" (p. 564). Some possible external sources of calling include "God, a higher power, a family legacy, or the needs of society" (p. 564). The belief in destiny as a source of calling asserts "that there is one career that someone is meant to do" (p. 565). The third possible source of calling is that of the "perfect fit between the individual's skills, values, and interests and an occupation" (p. 565). The process of self-discovery is essential to finding one's calling within this third source of calling.

Duffy and his colleagues conducted a quantitative study with a sample of 200 working adults within the United States. They reported that "participants who indicate they are living a calling experience high levels of satisfaction with work and life irrespective of the particular source of the calling they perceive" (p. 570). These authors also reported that "viewing the source of one's calling as a perfect fit with one's interest, skills, and values … was most common" (p. 571).

Adams (2012) also points out this shift away from the traditional understanding of a call originating with an external caller. He observed a shift in the literature to a "more secular perspective on calling" (p. 67). The traditional perspective understands the call to originate with God or higher power; in contrast, the secular perspective views the call as originating from within the individual. The other changes in this shift to a secular perspective identified by Adams (p. 67) are displayed in Table 1.

Table 1
Shift in Vocation to Secular Perspective

| | Traditional View of Calling | Secular View of Calling |
|---|---|---|
| **Who is Served by the Calling** | Community | Individual and/or community |
| **Method for Identifying the Calling** | Discernment through prayer | Introspection, reflection, meditation, and relational activities |
| **Meaning of One's Calling** | Fulfilling God's plan for one's life | Finding one's purpose for a sense of personal satisfaction |

As Adams (2012) and other researchers (Ponton et al., 2014) have pointed out, the modern perspective on calling, as discussed in the social science literature, has shifted away from the religious foundation toward a secular one. An inner drive toward fulfillment, happiness, and self-actualization has taken the place of an external caller. This shift underlies the emergence of separate definitions for the constructs of calling and vocation proposed by Dik and Duffy (2009).

Swiss theologian Karl Barth (2005) had much to say about vocation and calling. Barth explores two aspects of vocation. In its typical usage vocation "means a particular position and function of a man in connection with the process of human work" (p. 429). In a broader sense, vocation includes "a whole group of such positions and functions" (p. 429). Vocation is not distinct and separate from the rest of life. Instead, it "meets people in all their concrete, situated existence – as this particular person and no other" (Schuurman, 2004, p. 28). Barth's (2005) perspective was that vocation, in the broader sense, applies to all mankind "inasmuch as all are destined to be recipients of the divine calling and hearers of the divine command" (p. 430). Barth pointed out that "man does not live to work; he works to live" (p. 430). He noted that a person's vocation extends well beyond his or her profession; indeed, calling encompasses all a person's life. Therefore, vocation is not necessarily work-related and can be experienced through other aspects and roles of life (Adams, 2012). The popular perception that vocation is synonymous with job or career is not supported in the literature.

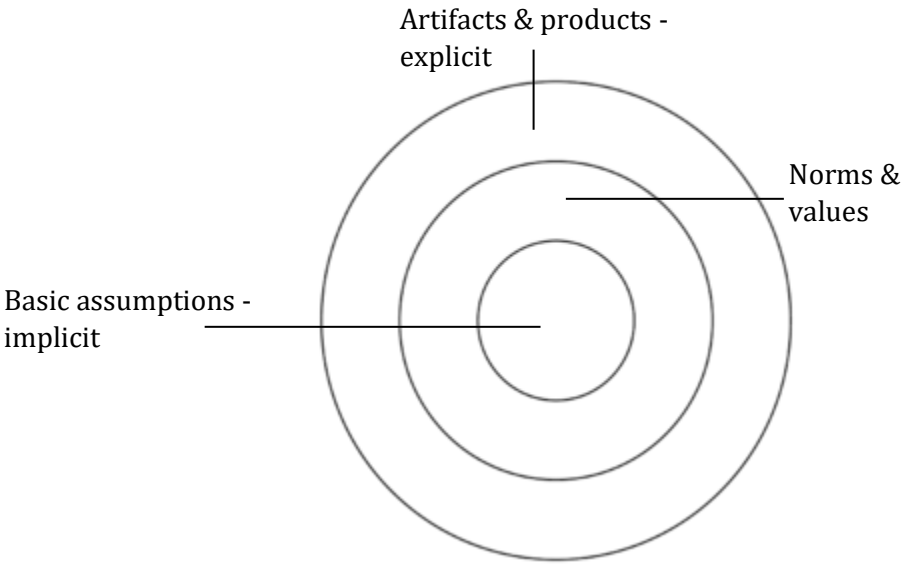
**Culture and Vocation**

Culture is real but hard to define. It is pervasive but, like air, is not apparent without conscious attention. Trompenaars and Hampden-Turner (1998) define culture as "the way in which a group of people solves problems and reconciles dilemmas" (p. 6). Hofstede (2011) defines culture as "the collective programming of the mind that distinguishes the members of one group or category of people from others" (p. 3). Swidler (1986) points out that culture consists of "symbolic vehicles of meaning, including beliefs, ritual practices, art forms, and ceremonies, as well as informal cultural practices such as language, gossip, stories, and rituals of daily life" (p. 273). The term culture is typically applied when seeking to understand nations, societies, tribes and ethnic groups, or organizations (Hofstede).

Culture encompasses everything, but without careful observation, it is invisible. Cultural analysis requires peeling back the layers to understand the essence of the culture. Figure 1 depicts a model of culture proposed by Trompenaars and Hampden-Turner (1998, p. 22). This model incorporates three layers of culture: a visible, explicit layer consisting of artifacts and products, a deeper layer of culture that encompasses the norms and values of a specific group, and an implicit layer of culture consisting of the basic assumptions held by the group (pp. 21-24).

Understanding a culture involves a process that is analogous to peeling the layers of an onion. The explicit layer, the layer of artifacts and products, is visible and easy to see or experience. This visible, explicit layer of culture encompasses that which can be readily observed including language, food, symbols, houses, monuments, art, and other artifacts. Music, architecture, the products produced in the culture (coffee, bananas, automobiles, computer chips, modes of transportation, the visual arts, and all of these are natural to see but give only an initial insight into the culture. To understand the culture requires looking into the deeper layers.

Figure 1
A model of culture




The deeper layers of culture embodied in-group norms and values and underlying assumptions require more than casual observation to understand. Careful and thoughtful observation is required, aided by conversations with crucial informants if the researcher is to understand the cultural implications of group norms and values and the underlying assumptions that underlie group life.

Norms are "the mutual sense a group has of what is right and wrong" while values "determine the definition of good and bad" (Trompenaars & Hampden-Turner, 1998, pp. 21-22). Values help "explain why different actors make different choices, even in similar situations" (Swidler, 1986, p. 274). Values also give insight into how, behaviorally, those in the culture will achieve goals and realize the vision (Rosen, Digh, Singer, & Phillips, 2000). For example, Isabel, a graduate of TLC, told the author that living on her own, living anywhere other than with family, is considered selfish for a young, unmarried woman in Honduras. This is a cultural norm that is experienced by all study participants. Also, education is a supported value in the culture of rural Honduras but not yet accepted as a norm (Seeley, 2018).

Finally, assumptions, the deepest layer of culture, make up the implicit layer of culture. These assumptions form the cultural core of a group. According to Trompenaars and Hampden-Turner, "The best way to test if something is a basic assumption is when the question provokes confusion or irritation" (p. 23). At the very heart of culture, underlying assumptions are accepted by members of the group without question. For example, gender roles are one assumption in the

culture of rural Honduras. Men make all the essential decisions for the women in the household while girls and young women are expected to fulfill the stereotypical gender role of "wife-mother-maintainer of the home" (Rowlands, 1997, p. 34). Related to this is the assumption in the machismo culture of rural Honduras that women are not capable of accomplishing their goals or realizing their dreams. These assumptions could help explain why so few young women in rural Honduras defy culture and tradition to pursue education and vocation and to chase their dreams.

Swidler (1986) views culture as a "tool kit" (p. 277) from which individuals draw to develop "strategies of action" (p. 277). In her understanding of culture, strategies form the plan for creating a life in which goals and objectives are achieved and within which "particular choices make sense" (p. 276). Skills and habits that have been shaped and informed by the cultural context become useful in carrying out the strategies of action. Swindler proposes two models for how culture influences action. The first model is that of "settled lives" (p. 278) in which culture and action are closely coupled. People instinctively know how to act based on traditions and the "undisputed authority of habit, normality, and common sense" (p. 281). The second model is that of "unsettled lives" (p. 278), which is a period of social transformation for individuals, groups, or entire societies. During such periods, culture "makes possible new strategies of action" (p. 280).

This dichotomy of settled lives and unsettled lives gives some insight into why some young Honduran women defy tradition, convention, and culture to pursue education and vocation despite the cultural and societal barriers they face while most do not. The young women of rural Honduras have grown up watching sisters, cousins, and neighbors get pregnant at a young age. Many know that their mothers and grandmothers began having children when they were very young. This is the pattern of the settled life in rural Honduran communities, and young women know it well. Many follow this pattern, but some want more; they want a different life for themselves than the settled life seen in their community. This minority is willing to experience the unsettled life; they actively seek opportunities that will allow them to become more than what the culture tells them they can be in the settled life.

Culture encompasses and influences, directly or indirectly, all aspects of daily life, including decisions and actions that involve the pursuit of vocation, or the lack thereof. Culture is not a construct discussed in the study of vocation and calling. Duffy and Dik (2013) point out that most of the research on "calling" has been limited to predominately White subjects living in North America (p. 433). According to these prolific researchers in the domain of calling and vocation, "The lack of diversity overall makes it impossible to know how calling is defined and functions" (p. 433) with individuals in other racial and ethnic groups, other cultures, and other countries. These same authors point out that "the available research evidence tells us very little about how those working under severe oppression and poverty experience a sense of calling, including how many find it relevant at all" (Dik & Duffy, 2012, p. 210). This paper contributes to filling this gap through an understanding of the cultural context for the pursuit of vocation in the lives of young women living in rural Honduras, where gender inequality, poverty, gang violence, and single mother-led households are part of daily life.

Dik and Duffy (2009) do offer a hypothesis on the role of culture but do not explore it in depth: "We hypothesize that calling and vocation are relevant across multiple cultural perspectives, but that differences in the expression of these constructs may exist cross-culturally (e.g., greater emphasis on meaningfulness in individualist cultures and greater emphasis on social contributions in collectivist cultures)" (p. 437). It is worth noting that Honduras is

considered a collectivist culture (Hofstede, n.d.); an emphasis on social contributions could be expected in the pursuit of vocation. Study results align with this expectation.

The connection between vocation/calling and one facet of culture, religion, has been extensively explored. The specific concepts of vocation and calling have historical roots in the Christian faith tradition but do not appear explicitly in other faith traditions (Cahalan & Schuurman, 2016, p. xi). The essence of vocation and calling can be seen in other faith traditions as well. Cahalan, Schuurman, and their colleagues (2016) have explored the concepts of vocation and calling in eight faith traditions: Judaism, Catholicism, Protestant Christianity, Islamic perspective, Hindu tradition, the Buddhist tradition, Confucian and Daoist perspectives, and Secular traditions. Writing from the perspective of the Christian faith, Buechner succinctly summarizes an insight into a vocation that captures the perspective of most faith traditions: "The place God calls you to is the place where your deep gladness and the world's deep hunger meet" (Pemberton, 2014). Vocation can be found at the intersection of what brings the most joy to the individual while meeting the deep needs of the world. This insight sets the stage for how the cultural context serves as a driver for the motivational influence to pursue a vocation.
There is no focused research to shed light on how aspects of a culture other than religion influence the pursuit of vocation. This paper seeks to contribute to filling that gap by exploring how aspects of the culture of rural Honduras influence the pursuit of vocation by young Honduran women. The study on which this paper is based utilized a research methodology built on ethnographic research methods to investigate the motivational influences driving young Honduran women to pursue a vocation.

## Research Methodology

### Selection of Study Participants

Purposeful sampling techniques were utilized to select the sample for the research study discussed in this paper (Creswell, 2007; J. A. Maxwell, 2005; Patton, 1990). The selection of a setting and participants who can provide the researcher with the information needed to answer the research questions is "the most important consideration in qualitative selection decisions" (J. A. Maxwell, p. 88). Intensity sampling (Patton) was used to select individuals to participate in the interviews. During the participant-observer phase of this study, the researcher was explicitly looking and listening for students and graduates of The Leadership Center, who displayed an intense, but not extreme, passion for education and vocation. This approach follows Creswell's (2007) counsel that study participants be "carefully chosen to be individuals who have all experienced the phenomenon in question, so that the researcher, in the end, can forge a common understanding" (p. 62). Given that all the students and graduates of The Leadership Center have experienced the phenomenon of pursuing education and vocation, students not selected for individual interviews were invited to participate in focus group discussions. Those graduates not invited to participate in individual interviews were not available to participate in focus group discussions due to logistical issues.

The design for the study reported in this paper utilized the above sampling techniques to select a sample for individual interviews consisting of 11 current students (mix of first and second-year students) and 12 graduates. Also, eleven first-year students were invited to participate in focus group interviews; 4 chose to participate. All students and many graduates were invited to complete the reflective essay. Reflective essays were received from a total of 20 students and graduates. In total, 30 young women participated in this study through individual interviews, group interviews, and reflective essay. Note: All study participants mentioned in this article have been given pseudonyms to protect their identities.

## Data Collection

The purpose of this qualitative, ethnographic study was to discover and describe the motivational influences in the lives of students and graduates of The Leadership Center as they traveled a journey through high school to The Leadership Center in pursuit of a vocation in business, bilingual teaching, or serving with an NGO. The design for this study utilized ethnographic research methods, including participant observation, semi-structured individual interviews, unstructured interviewing, group interviewing through focus groups, and self-reporting through written essays. The use of multiple ethnographic research methods and a variety of sources (students, graduates, immersion in daily life on campus) enabled the researcher to implement the technique of triangulation (Marshall & Rossman, 2016; J. A. Maxwell, 2005), which is "the act of bringing more than one source of data to bear on a single point" (Marshall & Rossman, p. 262). Triangulation reduces the risk that conclusions will reflect the "systematic biases or limitation of a specific source or method" (J. A. Maxwell, p. 93).

The author lived in a small casita on the campus of The Leadership Center while conducting this study. He lived daily life with students, frequently engaging in conversation, eating meals with them, teaching and coaching them, and participating in recreational and spiritual activities with them. Daily life on campus afforded the author many opportunities for observation, informal discussions, casual conversations, and unstructured interviewing. This was an ideal situation for participant observation as the author immersed in the environment and culture of TLC and rural Honduras. This life situation also enabled informal conversation and the possibility of conducting unstructured interviews as part of these informal conversations (Fife, 2005). The ethnographic methods utilized during the study yielded six significant themes.

## Research Findings

Although culture was not a topic explicitly covered in interviews and the reflective essay, facets of the culture of rural Honduras were mentioned by study participants more often than any other topic. The themes that emerged from the analysis of the data collected during the study encapsulate the significant influences driving study participants in the pursuit of education and vocation. Six major themes emerged from the analysis of study content:

**Theme 1:** The culture of rural Honduras forms the context in which the pursuit of education and vocation takes place.

**Theme 2:** Study participants expressed a desire to serve others.

**Theme 3:** Study participants want others (family, peers, community) to know that as women, they are fully capable of accomplishing their dreams and goals despite what the machismo culture believes about women.

**Theme 4:** Study participants expressed a desire for something better for their lives, their families, their communities, and their country.

**Theme 5:** Study participants recognize the importance of education for changing their families, their communities, their country, and the trajectory of their own lives.

**Theme 6:** Encouragement is critical in a culture filled with discouragement for girls and young women.

The culture of rural Honduras (Theme 1) forms the context in which the pursuit of education and vocation takes place. Facets of the culture of rural Honduras serve as goads to action triggering the motivational influences which drove study participants forward. This study demonstrates that it is critical to consider the cultural context when seeking to understand the motivational influences driving young Honduran women in pursuit of education and vocation.

This lesson can be generalized to other populations as well. Culture is a necessary construct when seeking to understand the pursuit of vocation by any population.

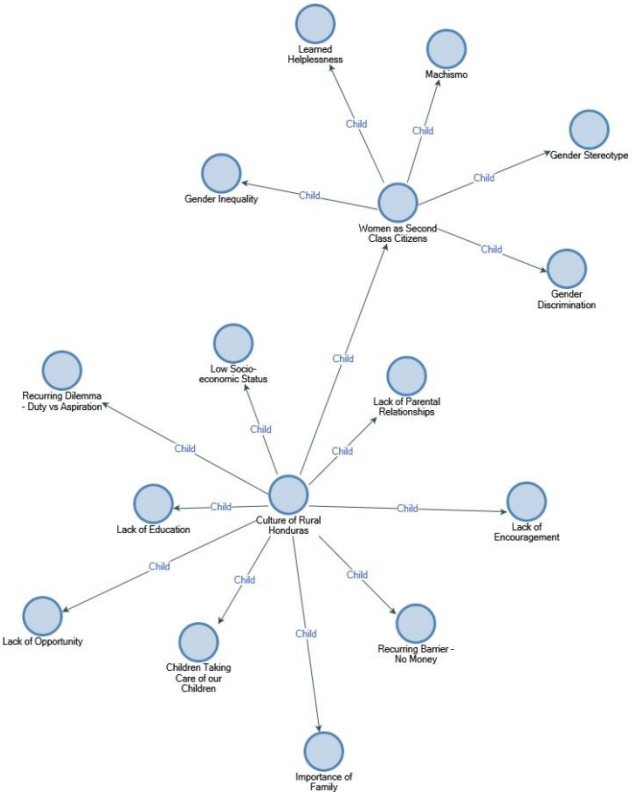
Trompenaars and Hampden-Turner (1998) assert that "culture is beneath awareness in the sense that no one bothers to verbalize it, yet it forms the roots of action" (p. 24). The design of this study did not explicitly inquire about the culture of rural Honduras. However, questions included in the interview and reflective essay protocols triggered responses from study participants that shed light on the culture of rural Honduras and how facets of the culture influence their pursuit of education and vocation, and revealed that the culture of rural Honduras forms the roots of the actions taken by study participants in their pursuit of vocation.

**Theme 1: The Culture of Rural Honduras**

In a recent research report prepared for the US Congress, Meyer (2018) described Honduras as having "widespread poverty, fragmented families, and a lack of education and employment opportunities" (p. 10). Comments from study participants affirm this characterization. Widespread poverty, coded as low socioeconomic status in this study, was mentioned 80 times, which is 28% of all the items coded within the theme of the culture of rural Honduras. The prevalence of non-traditional families, or fragmented families as Meyer put it, appears to be a contributing factor to the widespread poverty as many families are led by single mothers or by grandparents. This issue is discussed briefly under the lack of parental relationships subtheme. A lack of employment opportunities is discussed under the lack of opportunity subtheme.

Figure 2 is a mind map of the facets of culture discussed by study participants. Each subsidiary node represents a subtheme to Theme 1, the culture of rural Honduras. In total, facets of the culture of rural Honduras were mentioned by study participants more often than any other topic. While culture was not a topic explicitly covered in interviews and the reflective essay, all twenty-three individual interviews and all but one reflective essay included some mention of a facet of culture. The culture of rural Honduras forms the context in which the pursuit of education and vocation takes place. Both the motivational influences driving these young women in pursuit of education and vocation as well as the barriers holding them and others back have their roots within the culture.

Figure 2
Facets of Culture of Rural Honduras




Subtheme 1: Low Socioeconomic Status. Poverty, growing up in low socioeconomic status, is a significant barrier for all the study participants. Some participants characterize this situation as coming from a humble family. If Trompenaars and Hampden-Turner (1998) are correct that culture is "the way in which a group of people solves problems and reconciles dilemmas" (p. 6), then the most significant problem to be solved in rural Honduras is that of poverty. Therefore, based on participants' comments, the culture of rural Honduras is not yet attuned to the magnitude of the problem of poverty. Instead, it appears that many of the facets of culture mentioned by study participants contribute to the problem of poverty rather than solving it.

Almost every participant mentioned poverty as a significant issue in their lives. One study participant commented, "The story of my life comes from the very bottom of society. There have been many struggles on the way. The process has been long" (Yissel). Another stated, "Finances have been the most common problem for me" (Yoseli). Yet another participant stated “I am from a poor family. My parents already suffered a lot when they were children; they are still suffering. Lives of the poor people are challenging, and because of that I never want to give up studying. I have seen how education can help us to stop being ignorant and get great opportunities in our life” (Tatiana). Another participant offered, "I come from a very humble family. I have six younger siblings, three sisters, and three brothers. I was raised by my grandmother" (Gabriela). Meraida pointed out that the only barrier she encountered on the path to high school and The Leadership Center was lack of money. Isabel grew up in a low-income family, raised by her grandparents. Her father abandoned the family and her mother passed away

when she was quite young. Eda Marixi reported that her family did not have the money to meet many needs, including the need for medical care or to buy her a new shirt for school.

Survival is one of mankind's most basic motivational influences. From a cultural perspective, "the most basic value people strive for is survival" (Trompenaars & Hampden-Turner, 1998, p. 23). Many participants come from family situations in which survival is the main issue the family faces. Yoseli commented on the struggle for survival: "I have seen how my grandfather and other members of my family work hard, but they do so to survive. Being a farmer here in Honduras does not give much." Mitchel mentioned the uncertainty of what the family would eat for dinner or lunch: "I have had a hard time in my life living with my family in poverty. We must think about what we will eat for dinner or lunch. That is another reason why I am pursuing an education to help the family." Gabriela noted that at times her family had only enough money for two meals a day. Even the basic need for shelter is a challenge for some study participants and their families. Haydee pointed out the situation for her family, commenting, "When I was born, my parents were very poor; they didn't have a house where we live. Even (now) we don't have our own house." She elaborated on this basic need, commenting, "Our life has been very hard. We almost all the time were suffering of hunger because we were 'floating around' because we didn't have a house."

Food and shelter are some of the most basic needs to sustain life. Survival and the provision of these basic needs fall into the category of physiological needs in Maslow's hierarchy of needs. As Hersey, Blanchard, and Johnson (2001) point out, "Until these basic needs are satisfied to the degree needed for the sufficient operation of the body, the majority of a person's activity will probably be at this level, and the other needs will provide little motivation" (p. 37). For study participants and their families, the lack of food, shelter, and disposable income is a barrier to the pursuit of education and vocation.

Low socioeconomic status and the lack of education form a negative self-reinforcing cycle, a vicious circle keeping people trapped in poverty. The lack of education is a second subtheme within the culture of rural Honduras.

Subtheme 2: Lack of Education. This subtheme encompasses a lack of opportunity for education as well as lack of educational role models. Many rural communities do not have schools. Children and young people must find some way to get to their school if they are going to attend school. Moreover, there are no school buses in rural communities. Typically, they walk, often for a long time. Some move to another community to attend a school, living with relatives or with strangers. This living arrangement puts additional hardship on families that are already financially and emotionally strained. The lack of education emerged as an element of the culture of rural Honduras while the importance of education emerged as a counter theme to the cultural impediments to education. The issues associated with the pursuit of education by women in rural Honduras have previously been discussed in detail (Seeley, 2018).

Two subthemes, the recurring barrier – no money and the recurring dilemma –duty vs. aspiration, are elements in the negative self-reinforcing cycle of low socioeconomic status and lack of education, a vicious circle keeping people trapped in poverty. Study participants have overcome the recurring barrier and resolved the dilemma, at least at the time of the study.

Subtheme 3: The Recurring Barrier – No Money. This barrier results from low economic status. No job (or a low paying job) results in little or no money for school, preventing some from continuing their education. Without some form of intervention, this ultimately results in a dead-end existence for the person experiencing it. It also causes emotional upheaval within that

person. This is labeled a recurring barrier given that multiple study participants mentioned it, and some experienced this barrier at several points in their lives.

This is a pattern experienced by many study participants. Without a job after high school, these young women cannot afford to continue their studies at universities. So, it is difficult for them to find jobs after high school. Without some form of intervention, they become trapped in a vicious cycle. Hitting this recurring barrier of no money to continue their educations and unable to find jobs that provided enough money to continue their educations left study participants feeling frustrated, disappointed, sad, angry, trapped, and worried about their futures. For the young women of rural Honduras, the lack of a job results in the lack of education. Several experienced this reality at all levels of education from the primary grades through university-level studies. With help, study participants were able to break through this barrier to continue their studies. However, many often then encountered the recurring dilemma of duty versus aspiration.

Subtheme 4: The Recurring Dilemma – Duty vs. Aspiration. The recurring dilemma challenging these young women is whether to get a job to help with family finances or to pursue their dreams of higher education, a better job, or other goals. The recurring dilemma pits perceived duty to family against personal aspirations. It pits the cultural norm of putting family above self to get a job, even one that is low paying, that will help with family expenses against the cultural value of aspiring to education and achievement. This is labeled a recurring dilemma given that multiple study participants mentioned it, and some experienced this dilemma at several points in their lives.

This dilemma of growing up in poverty, with the family remaining in poverty even as these young women go to The Leadership Center to study, learn new skills and gain new knowledge, and pursue their dreams, is an ever-present reality in the lives of these young women. They experience guilt for pursuing education and their dreams while their family is back home continuing in their reality of poverty. Breaking through the barrier of no money to pursue education and overcoming the dilemma of duty versus aspiration puts these young women on a path toward overcoming the cultural perception that women are second-class citizens.

Subtheme 5: Women as Second Class Citizens. Study participants had much to say about the perception of women in the culture of rural Honduras. This subtheme encompasses machismo, gender stereotype, gender inequality, gender discrimination, and learned helplessness. Machismo may be the underlying cause of the entire cultural perception that women are second-class citizens in rural Honduras.

The machismo element of culture "encourages men to dominate women and to exercise power and control aggressively" (Giordano et al., 2009, p. 997). This machismo element of the culture of rural Honduras leads to other cultural elements. Within a culture dominated by a machismo mindset, many men abandon their families, leaving the women to raise the children by themselves or with the help of grandparents, which contributes to a low socioeconomic status. Yaquelin talked about the severe economic impact on her family after her father left. Describing her father, she said, "He is an irresponsible man, lives 12 years in the USA but does not care for us." Her mother had to work multiple jobs to earn enough to take care of the family. Isabel, Yolibeth, and Gabriela also mentioned the fact that their fathers had abandoned the family when they were young. This pattern has been going on for generations, as described by Gabriela: "Grandmother had seven children, including twins, when my mother was seven years old. Grandfather left our grandmother with the children and went to live with another woman."

Gender discrimination is a source of discouragement for young women in rural Honduras. When discussing her goals with the author, Nataly told him, "If I tell these goals to my father, he is going to laugh in my face. He will say, 'come on Nataly, you are just a woman." Nelly reported on the discrimination family members leveled against her and her mother when she was born. The comment of these family members was, "Oh, it is just a girl." Like other study participants, Nelly turned this gender discrimination into a motivational influence driving her to pursue education and vocation. As she put it, "I want to show the family that my mother has a beautiful daughter who can accomplish something."

Seligman (2006) describes learned helplessness as "the giving-up reaction, the quitting response that follows from the belief that whatever you do does not matter" (p. 15). The intense pressures that accompany this cultural perspective that women are second-class citizens may lead many young women to give up. They stop their pursuit of education and vocation and give in to the cultural expectation that they become a mother at a young age. Eda Marixi thinks that this may be the case for many girls and young women in rural Honduras. Their parents keep telling them that they cannot continue their education because they will get pregnant, so they think, "I will do that because my parents are saying that." Unlike many others, however, study participants and the other students and graduates of The Leadership Center did not give up. They did not allow the cultural perception that women are second-class citizens to stop them in their pursuit of education and vocation. Many turned these cultural barriers into the motivational influence needed to drive them in pursuit of education and vocation.

Based on the input from study participants, there is a perception within the culture of rural Honduras that women are second-class citizens. One possible outcome of this cultural perception is that women in rural Honduras lack opportunity.

Subtheme 6: Lack of Opportunity. All the students and graduates of The Leadership Center are high school graduates. This puts them within a small minority of young women in rural Honduras. According to the World Education Blog (Rose, 2012), 10% of the poorest females aged 7 to 16 in Honduras have never been to school while the average years of education for the more deprived 17 to 22-year-old females are 4.1 years. After graduating from high school, many of these young women could not find jobs and had no opportunity to continue their studies at the university level. This fact led Nataly to conclude, "If you don’t have any degree you can’t work. It is very difficult to have a very good job that can give you the necessary things that you need." Yadira echoes this same conclusion, commenting that in Honduras secondary school is not enough to get a good job. This sad fact is repeated in the life of other study participants.

The participants repeatedly displayed their ability to take the negative aspects of the culture of rural Honduras and turn those aspects into positive motivational influences that drove them to pursue education and vocation instead of becoming mothers at a young age, as is the case for many young women in rural Honduras.

Subtheme 7: Children Taking Care of Our Children. Study participants described an environment in their home communities in which girls became mothers at a young age. Teen pregnancy is a facet of the culture of rural Honduras and presents a significant problem, perpetuating the cycle of poverty as many of these young mothers become young single mothers. Bearing children at a young age further restricts the limited opportunities available to the young women of rural Honduras.

Eda Marixi commented that the general belief is that, for girls as young as 12, "if she goes to high school, she will just fall in love and get pregnant." Yadira observed that "young

girls 15 years old have a boyfriend and get pregnant." A cultural norm in rural Honduras, according to Gabriela, is that by the time a young woman turns 18, she should already have babies. Mariela made several striking observations about the culture of rural Honduras. First, she asserted that most girls are just thinking about boyfriends and getting pregnant. She then made a statement that gives this subtheme its title: "Women in Honduras get pregnant at 12 years old. They are children taking care of our children." Continuing her commentary on the culture, she used an interesting expression to characterize the decisions of many women in Honduras: "Women do not see beyond the tip of their nose." In the culture of rural Honduras, girls give birth at a young age. They are children raising the next generation in rural Honduras. They do not see beyond the tip of their noses, believing the lies that boys and men tell them (Eda Marixi). As a result, they become trapped in the cycle of poverty.

The cultural characteristic of teen pregnancy is closely related to another cultural characteristic, the lack of parental relationships.

*Subtheme 8: Lack of Parental Relationships.* Some study participants were fortunate enough to have been raised in traditional nuclear families with both father and mother. Some were not as fortunate. Meyer (2018) reported that “fragmented families” (p. 10) is a factor in understanding crime and deteriorating security conditions in Honduras.

Seven participants specifically mentioned the absence of a father in the home. Three others mentioned their fathers in the context of not having a good relationship with them. Another study participant mentioned that her father passed away when she was young. One experienced the loss of her mother to death and the loss of her father through abandonment. One or more grandparents raised three participants with little or no parental involvement. A godmother raised one participant. That participant has a long-distance relationship with her mother but no relationship with her father. One participant commented that she has never had any contact with her father, not even hearing her father’s voice on the phone. Several study participants talked about the role that mothers played in their lives but never mentioned their fathers. Very few mentioned their father as having played an essential role in their lives.

The lack of parental relationships is a complicating factor in the culture of rural Honduras. The absence of a father contributes to the low socioeconomic status of many study participants. The lack of the income of a father/husband in households led by single mothers increases the likelihood that participants face the recurring dilemma, the perceived duty to get a job to help with family expenses versus the pursuit of their dreams for education and vocation. Even though the reality of fragmented families is a complicating factor, families, however they may be structured, are still an important element in the culture of rural Honduras.

*Subtheme 9: Importance of Family.* The importance of family is a cultural norm in rural Honduras. Mothers, fathers, parents, grandmothers, grandfathers, aunts, uncles, and siblings were all mentioned as playing influential roles in the lives of study participants. The recurring dilemma, faced by many study participants at various points in their lives, is an intense internal pressure to give up their dreams and the pursuit of education and vocation to get a job so they can help with family expenses. It is a cultural norm that young unmarried women live with their families until they are married. To live anyplace other than the family home is considered selfish.

It is also a cultural norm that young unmarried women help their families economically when they get a job. Angelica stated this norm clearly: “For our culture, that is important. You go to help your people, your parents, like with money.” Several participants mentioned being helped financially by older siblings so they had money for education-related expenses such as

school supplies and uniforms. For example, Yolibeth pointed out that neither of her older brothers continued their education beyond high school because both had to go to work to earn money to help the family. Yoseli's sister worked to help her continue studying in high school and The Leadership Center. This cultural norm continues in the lives of study participants. Blanca, Eda Marixi, and Gabriela all mentioned helping their younger siblings with education-related expenses so they could continue their studies. One specific example of financially helping family members comes from Yissel, whose mother and one younger sister work with her in the retail store she started after graduating from The Leadership Center.

Even while studying at The Leadership Center some students face the pressure of the recurring dilemma to leave TLC so they can go back to their home communities in the hope of finding a job to help families economically. Some students have quit their studies at TLC for that exact reason. The young women who drop out of TLC to help families economically do so at the high price of forsaking their aspirations for education and vocation. As a result, the cycle of poverty continues.

*Subtheme 10: Lack of Encouragement.* "To encourage people is to help them gain the courage they might not otherwise possess –courage to face the day, to do what's right, to take risks, to make a difference. And the heart of encouragement is to communicate a person's value. When we help people feel valuable, capable, and motivated we sometimes see their lives change forever – and then see them go on to change the world." (J. C. Maxwell, 2008, p.9)

As can be seen in the proceeding discussion, the culture of rural Honduras presents many challenges and erects many barriers for young women. They are put down, held back, discriminated against, belittled, and discouraged. Women feel devalued, and the culture tells them that they are not capable of accomplishing much. Besides, there are few opportunities open to them. The role defined for them by the culture is that of "wife–mother–maintainer of the home" (Rowlands, 1997, p. 34). In such a culture, young women desperately need encouragement to pursue their dreams. They need encouragement to pursue education and vocation and to change their world.

The importance of encouragement is a frequent topic at TLC. Study participants brought it up often enough that the author conducted a select focus group on the topic of encouragement. Encouragement is sadly lacking in the culture of rural Honduras. Yoseli articulated this issue succinctly: "Encouragement is not something that is very common in our culture. There are not many people in my family that encourage me." Nataly echoed this same assessment, stating that in Honduras, "nobody is encouraging you." She emphasized her point with the observation that "we lack a lot of encouragement, mostly the women." Sadly, Eda Marixi reported that she never heard words of encouragement when she was growing up. She had to encourage herself in her mind. She told herself, "Come on; you can do this." She commented that she did not think she had anyone else who was encouraging her.

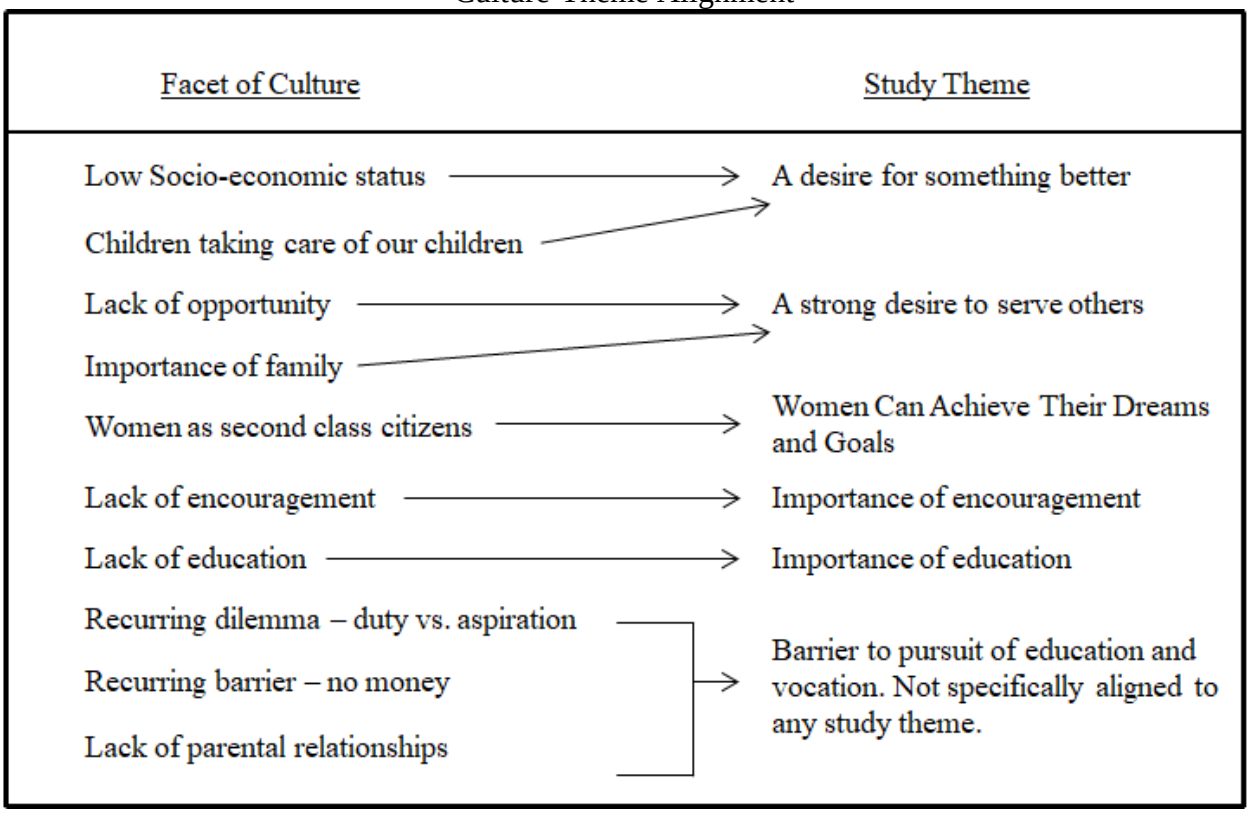
**Cultural Influence on the Motivational Drivers for the Pursuit of Vocation**

The culture of rural Honduras forms the context in which the pursuit of education and vocation takes place or does not. Facets of the culture erect significant barriers hindering the pursuit of education and vocation. Some young women, such as the participants in the study reported in this paper, can overcome the cultural barriers to continue their pursuit of education and vocation. They have demonstrated the ability to take the negative aspects of culture and turn them into positive motivational forces to propel them forward in the pursuit of education and vocation. The motivational influences driving them in pursuit of education and vocation are discussed in the remaining themes emerging from this study.

However, many young women are hindered by cultural barriers. They are not able to overcome the barriers and give up their pursuit of education and vocation. What about those young women who choose to follow tradition, convention, and cultural norms, who choose to forgo education, and who remain in their communities and begin having children at a young age? What motivates them to take that path? The design of this study did not include that line of research. One possible answer may come from "cultural lag" (Swidler, 1986, p. 281). Swidler points out that "people do not readily take advantage of new structural opportunities which would require them to abandon established ways of life" (p. 281). It may be the case that such young women are "reluctant to abandon familiar strategies of action for which they have the cultural equipment" (p. 281). The participants in this study took advantage of every opportunity that came their way to continue their education and pursue a vocation. Many young women in rural Honduras, however, continue the path of having children at a young age. This is a strategy of action that they are familiar with and observe often in daily life in their rural communities and they may be reluctant to abandon that which is known to pursue that which is unknown and risky.

The themes that emerged from the analysis of the data collected during this study encapsulate the significant influences driving study participants in the pursuit of education and vocation. The culture of rural Honduras forms the context in which the pursuit of education and vocation takes place. Facets of the culture of rural Honduras serve as the goads to action triggering the motivational influences that drove study participants forward. Figure 3 depicts the alignment between facets of culture and the remaining study themes. These relationships are discussed under each study theme.

Figure 3
Culture-Theme Alignment




**Theme 2: A Strong Desire to Serve Others**

The topic of serving was mentioned by study participants more frequently than any other topic that could be considered a motivational influence. Study participants expressed a desire to serve God and others. This finding aligns to the Protestant doctrine of vocation, which focuses on serving God and serving others. Even the secular perspective on vocation and calling has as its core other-oriented motivations. The author found this result surprising, given that The Leadership Center provides educational training in leadership, business, community development, and English. There is an underlying emphasis at The Leadership Center on entrepreneurial activity. Students and graduates receive guidance and assistance in starting a small business should they desire to do so. No responses from participants fell within the code "possibility of business success." Succeeding in business is not a motivational influence driving study participant to pursue education and vocation while serving God and others appear to be a strong motivational influence. Tatiana clearly articulated this desire held by study participants: "My purpose of life is to serve others. To live for myself, that's not ok. We are here for them." Yessica is a graduate and the only married study participant. She articulated this same motivational influence on behalf of herself and her husband:

> Our aspirations are about serving, not about being rich. I dreamt about doing something that is fulfilling and something that will set a good example for my future children. It doesn't have to do with being rich. Really, when I am old I want to think that I did something meaningful, not only to me but to others.

The participants all came from humble families and grew up in low socioeconomic families. They do not yet have the financial means to be philanthropists. Having a professional job or a job in business or starting their own small business is vital to participants. Study participants desire to start businesses so they can provide job opportunities to family members and others. They would all like to earn money to live on and to help their families. However, money and the prospect of earning money do not appear to be a motivational influence driving them to pursue education and vocation. The desire to serve and help others is a much stronger motivational influence than is making money. Moreover, the desire to show that women can achieve their dreams and goals despite what the culture says motivates many study participants in their pursuit of education and vocation.

**Theme 3: Women Can Achieve Their Dreams and Goals**

In the culture of rural Honduras, men are dominant, and women are second-class citizens. The culture maintains that it is not worth educating girls and young women because they will only get pregnant and have babies. Rowlands (1997) asserts that "if women have ambitions, these are generally expressed through hopes for their children and what the latter might achieve if they can attend school" (p. 34). Contrary to this observation, study participants do have ambitions. They do have dreams and goals. They do aspire to much more than the culturally defined gender role for women. Also, they do want their families, their peers, and their communities to know that as women, they are fully capable of accomplishing their dreams and goals despite what the machismo culture believes about women.

What enables some to achieve their goals while others give up? One possible answer is that some are willing to do more, to persevere in the face of difficulty when others give up, to tap into their passion for driving them forward, for giving highest priority to achieving their goals. Those who do not give up in the face of pressure to do so demonstrate grit (A. Duckworth, 2016). Gabriela put into words what many study participants demonstrate through the way they live their lives: "Not having money or coming from a poor family never holds me back from having goals or dreams and work hard for them, and will never stop me from looking forward and helping others in the future." Gabriela is describing grit.

The cultural mindset of those living in rural Honduras does not believe that women can achieve their goals. Study participants want others to know that as women, they are fully capable of achieving their goals. Study participants carry dreams about changing the future for themselves, for their families, for their communities, and others. For some young Honduran women, dreams provide the motivational influence driving them to pursue education and vocation. The participants are showing their families and their communities that young Honduran women can achieve their dreams and their goals. One out of every three participants offered explicit statements that they wanted to show others that accomplishing their goals was possible. They want the people who are most important to them, including community members, to see that they are different from most girls and young women in rural Honduras. So, they show it through their actions.

Study participants are also motivated by a desire for something better, a better life and lifestyle, than they experienced growing up.

**Theme 4: A Desire for Something Better**

Teenage pregnancy is a significant issue in the culture of rural Honduras. Teenage pregnancy often leads to households being led by a single mother, which then leads to a low socioeconomic status for those households. So, the cycle of poverty continues into another generation. All participants mentioned some variation on the theme of a desire for something

better. Two characteristics of the culture of rural Honduras serve as triggers for a desire for something better to serve as a motivational influence to pursue education and vocation. Many participants articulated their desire to be different from most girls who become mothers at a young age. They did not want to be children taking care of children. Study participants also voiced their desire to have a different life for themselves and their families than the one they experienced growing up. They want to break the cycle of poverty for themselves, their families, and any children they may have in the future.

Study participants desired a different life for themselves, their families, their future children, and others in their communities. Through their examples, they hope to inspire others to make choices leading to a better life. The participants understand the power of a role model in inspiring others. They expressed the desire to be role models, setting an example for others to follow on the path to a better life. They seek to be good role models for younger sisters, other family members, and girls and young women in their communities and churches, and they understand the importance of education to help them achieve their goals and realize their dreams.

**Theme 5: Importance of Education**

Education is a powerful weapon in the war against poverty. Study participants understand and articulate the importance of education despite the cultural acceptance of a lack of education for girls and young women in rural Honduras. They clearly articulated their belief that pursuit of education is one of the most important ways they can improve life for themselves and others. The issues associated with the pursuit of education by women in rural Honduras was previously discussed (Seeley, 2018). Encouragement is a companion to education in enabling young Honduran women to move beyond the culturally defined role for women.

**Theme 6: Importance of Encouragement**

Many participants mentioned the lack of encouragement in the Honduran culture and the resulting need for encouragement. Encouragement is a topic frequently discussed at The Leadership Center, given the pervading spirit of discouragement that surrounds girls and young women in the culture of rural Honduras. They grew up in a culture in which discouragement is an ever-present reality for girls and young women. A few participants received encouragement from parents; most did not. Eda Marixi commented that "in some families, the siblings put each other down. That makes it difficult and discouraging." Nataly and Eda Marixi both pointed out that advice offered by family members is often a form of discouragement. Eda Marixi said that her relatives tried to give advice, "but they do not know how to do to it. They supposedly give advice, but the way they do it, it is more like discouragement. They pick the wrong way to do it." She expressed feelings of hurt by the things her relatives said in their attempts to give advice. Nataly had a similar observation about the advice given by relatives:

> They think they are giving good advice, but they're not. When my sister told my parents that she wanted to study nursing, my father said, "What, are you crazy? That is not for you. You can find something else to do. No, we cannot be thinking that." For my father, to think about going to university is too high. They try to give advice. They think the goals are too high, so they are discouraging. When you hear that from your parents, your brothers, that is not helpful.

The young women of rural Honduras handle this environment of discouragement in different ways. Many give up and give in to the demands and pressures of the machismo culture. According to Eda Marixi, "Their parents keep telling them that they can't continue their education because they will just get pregnant, so they think 'I will do that because my parents are

saying that.'" Eda Marixi pointed out that these girls and young women need to hear words of encouragement: "They really need to see life in a different way."

Some turn the words of discouragement into motivational influences that drive them to pursue education and vocation. Commenting on the discouragement and negative comments coming from uncles and her aunts, Eda Marixi said,

> Every time I heard something negative, I just thought to myself, 'I will prove you wrong.' I try to forget about it. It is so hard but I try. I just cry. Sometimes it helps me to turn that bad situation into something that encourages me. I will try to show that person.

Mitchel reported that many people discouraged her from continuing her education. When such discouragement came her way, she responded by thinking "about my goals, and that people just tell me that because they are jealous of the things I have accomplished." Yissel and her sister did the same when one of them became discouraged; they encouraged each other by reminding each other of their goals. Other study participants agreed with Eda Marixi that they too would try to turn discouragement into something that would encourage them.

Nataly offered interesting advice to anyone who hears discouraging statements: "Find someone else who wants to help you." Without knowing it, Nataly is recommending that those who are confronted with discouragement that they cannot overcome seek the help of a proxy agent (Bandura, 2001). Bandura (2001) speaks to the need that these young women have for someone to help them when they face discouragement and the other barriers that are inherent in the culture of rural Honduras:

> In many spheres of functioning, people do not have direct control over the social conditions and institutional practices that affect their everyday lives. Under these circumstances, they seek their well-being, security, and valued outcomes through the exercise of proxy agency (p. 13).

A proxy agent is someone who uses his or her influence, resources, and power on behalf of someone else who needs such intervention or assistance to move forward to accomplish something that they would not otherwise be able to accomplish (Bandura, 2001).

Culture emerged as an essential contextual element in seeking to understand the motivational influences driving study participants to pursue education and vocation. Revisiting the theoretical foundations underlying the design of this study helps to put study themes into a broader theoretical context and yields six research conclusions.

## Research Conclusions

The foundation for the design of this study is built on two major theoretical pillars: motivation and vocation. The theoretical motivation pillar encompasses several significant theories, including self-determination theory, grit, and goals as a motivational influencer. An exploration of research findings from the perspective of this theoretical foundation led to six research conclusions.

### Self-determination Theory

Self-determination theory provides an essential framework for understanding the motivational influences driving young Honduran women to pursue education and vocation. Deci and his colleagues (1991) report that "motivated actions are self-determined to the extent that they are engaged in wholly volitionally and endorsed by one's sense of self" (p. 326). The individual considers the "locus of causality" (p. 327) to be internal when a behavior or decision is self-determined while the locus of causality is external when a behavior or decision is controlled by someone else. Study participants mentioned numerous items that were coded as internal locus of causality but did not mention anything coded as external locus of causality.

Participants appeared to be driven by internal motivational forces not by external forces or inducements.

A key question initially prompted this study: Why do some young Honduran women defy tradition, convention, and culture to pursue education and a vocation rather than following the cultural norm of bearing and raising children at a young age? The research work of Deci (1996) puts this corollary question into a broader context. His extensive study of motivation led him to observe the following:

> …one finds countless people who were raised in poverty and neglect in our inner cities or rural countrysides and who go on to distinguished careers – or, remarkable in its own right, to stable, satisfying lives, providing for their children what was not provided for them and contributing to their community with a spirit of gratitude and hope. Even though people's motivations, behavior, and well-being are powerfully influenced by their social environments, it is fascinating that some people are able to fare quite admirably despite having experienced an upbringing marked by pressures, chaos, abuse, or neglect. How is one to account for this seeming puzzle? (p. 177)

Deci posed this question about individuals in the United States who overcame barriers and constraints of their environment; making a different life for themselves and their families and having a positive influence on their communities. Deci's characterization and question are relevant to the young women of rural Honduras who also overcome the machismo culture, gender discrimination, and poverty to realize their hopes for a better life for themselves and their families and to have a positive influence on their communities.

Deci (1996) accounts for this apparent puzzle in several ways. First, he notes that individuals who have risen above their impoverished background and the barriers they frequently confronted "tell the story of some person who truly believed in them and gave them the support they needed to believe in themselves" (pp. 178-179). This is the case for many study participants. The presence of a special support person in the lives of study participants and the importance of encouragement in a culture filled with discouragement for girls and young women leads to the first study conclusion: Some young Honduran women were able to overcome the societal and cultural barriers they faced through the assistance of one or more people who provided special support and encouragement.

The second factor mentioned by Deci (1996) as a possible explanation for this puzzle is that of the innate characteristics of the individual and the effect these individual characteristics can have on the social environment. Deci explains that children who are more vital and engaging "can elicit greater involvement and autonomy support from the same parents and teachers who are colder and more controlling with other children" (p. 180). While this factor was not discussed explicitly with study participants, there is evidence that holds true for many study participants. Many participants worked hard even as children to earn extra money so they could contribute to family finances and help with school-related expenses.

Study data support the second research conclusion: For at least some young Honduran women, their innate characteristics, their passion, and their drive helped them to influence their environments and overcome some of the barriers put up by the culture of rural Honduras.

A third factor that explains this "seeming puzzle" (Deci, 1996, p. 177) is the ability some people have to make things happen for themselves "rather than waiting for the world to give them what they want" (pp. 184-185). As Deci points out, this "gives people a handle to facilitate their development" (p. 184). This factor resides in the realm of human agency. Bandura (2001) asserts that "to be an agent is to intentionally make things happen by one's actions" (p. 2).

According to Bandura, "the capacity to exercise control over the nature and quality of one's life is the essence of humanness" (p. 1). Bandura raises an incredibly important point that is relevant to the pursuit of education and vocation on the part of the young women of rural Honduras when he states that "efficacy beliefs also play a key role in shaping the courses lives take by influencing the types of activities and environments people choose to get into….By choosing and shaping their environments, people can have a hand in what they become" (pp. 10-11).

Study participants articulated the internal drive, intrinsic motivation, and the external actions that characterize a human agent. Through her determination and hard work, Eda Marixi convinced her parents to let her continue her studies in high school even though they were concerned she would get pregnant. Eda Marixi articulated her motivation as a human agent when she declared, "Since I was little I knew what I wanted. I am focused on what I am doing, and I know what I want." Through her efforts, Eda Marixi is becoming more than her parents thought possible when they held her back out of fear that she would follow the cultural norm of having children at a young age.

This example from the life of Eda Marixi is but one of the many examples articulated by study participants of their determination and drive as human agents. All study participants demonstrated the ability to make things happen for themselves. They did not wait for the world to give them what they wanted. These examples support the third research conclusion: Some young Honduran women have the ability to make things happen for themselves. They will not wait for the world to give them what they want, nor do they need to do so. They are fully capable of stepping into the role of human agents to make decisions and take actions for themselves in spite of what the machismo culture would have them believe.

**Grit: Perseverance and Passion**

What enables some to achieve their goals while others give up? One possible answer is that some are willing to do more, to persevere in the face of difficulty when others give up, to tap into their passion for driving them forward, for giving the highest priority to achieving their goals. Those who don't give up in the face of pressure to do so demonstrate grit. Duckworth and her colleagues (2007) define grit as "perseverance and passion for long-term goals" (p. 1087). Individuals with grit hold a "never give up attitude" (A. Duckworth, 2016, p. 7). Duckworth (2016) makes a statement that appears to be relevant to the setting for this research study in rural Honduras: "Those who defy the odds are especially gritty" (2016, p. 11).

The culture of rural Honduras presents many challenges and erects many barriers for young women. They are put down, held back, discriminated against, belittled, and discouraged. They are devalued, and the culture tells them that women are not capable of accomplishing much. To make matters worse, there are few opportunities open to them. Yet, even given these realities of their culture, study participants did not give up. Some were diverted for a period of time due to the recurring dilemma, the need to get a job to help with family expenses and give up their pursuit of their long-term goals. But they did not give up; they regained traction in pursuit of their long-term goals as soon as they could. Several study participants were set back by severe illness. But they did not give up; they regained traction in pursuit of their long-term goals. As young girls, both Mileydis and Blanca wanted to learn English and to become teachers. Both have achieved these goals. Both are now fluent in English, and both serve as bilingual teachers in an NGO. Both Mileydis and Blanca overcame the challenges and barriers that confronted them. They demonstrated perseverance and passion for accomplishing their long-term goals of learning English and becoming a teacher.

These are but a few of the many examples articulated by study participants that demonstrate grit. All study participants exhibited grit when graduating from high school, an accomplishment that puts them in a rare minority of the young women who live in rural Honduras. This leads to the fourth research conclusion: Some young Honduran women are characterized by grit, the perseverance and passion that enable them to achieve long-term goals in spite of the barriers erected by the culture of rural Honduras to keep women in place as second-class citizens.

**Goals as a Motivational Influencer**

The motivational literature establishes the importance of goals as a driver for motivation and accomplishment. The central concept in the goal-setting theory is that the action is caused by a purpose (Locke, 1996). One of the assertions of social-cognition theory is that human actions are goal-directed; individuals take action to achieve valued outcomes or to avoid undesirable outcomes (Miller & Brickman, 2004). Such outcome expectations serve as drivers for action (p. 11). The higher the value assigned to the outcome and the stronger the belief in the ability to achieve the outcome, the more likely it is that the individual will act and put forth effort in the pursuit of the outcome (p. 11). According to social-cognition theory, "goals, rooted in a value system and a sense of personal identity, invest activities with meaning and purpose" (Bandura, 2001, p. 8).

The culture of rural Honduras tells girls and young women that they do not need goals. Within the culture of rural Honduras, many believe that women cannot accomplish goals even if they do have them. Men make all the decisions for women in a society dominated by a machismo mindset. The culture asserts that it is not worth educating girls and young women because they will only get pregnant and have babies. The cultural norm is that girls and young women become mothers at a very young age. The culturally defined role for women is that of "wife-mother-maintainer of the home" (Rowlands, 1997, p. 34). Rowlands (1997) asserts that "if women have ambitions, these are generally expressed through hopes for their children and what the latter might achieve if they can attend school" (p. 34).

Contrary to this observation, study participants do have ambitions. They do have dreams and goals. They do aspire to much more than the culturally defined gender role for women. And they are willing to make sacrifices and persevere through challenges and difficulty over many years to accomplish their goals. As young children, all participants had a distant goal of graduating from high school. Many had to make sacrifices on the path to achieving their goal, but all achieved it. Some study participants are still in progress against their goal of graduating from TLC while others have graduated and are living with the satisfaction of goal accomplishment. Women can accomplish their long-term goals despite the barriers erected by the culture of rural Honduras. This leads to the fifth research conclusion: Women are fully capable of accomplishing their long-term goals despite what the culture of rural Honduras and the machismo mindset believe about women.

Motivation and vocation are interrelated concepts. The primary purpose of the study reported in this paper was to discover and describe the motivational influences driving young Honduran women in pursuit of vocation.

**Motivation and Vocation**

Vocation is at the center of one of the conceptual patterns the author investigated in this study. The essence of the Christian view of vocation is to serve God and serve others in every sphere of life (Garber, 2014; Schuurman, 2004). Motivation and vocation are interrelated concepts. Schuurman suggests that "we should strive to discern what drives us in the major

decisions of our lives" (p. 131). Through interviews and reflective essays, study participants took time to discern and articulate what drove them in the significant decision to continue their education in high school and on to The Leadership Center, and to pursue a vocation.

The research of Duckworth (2016; A. L. Duckworth et al., 2007) into the psychological character trait labeled grit (2007) brings together the interrelated concepts of motivation and vocation. Passion, one of the two essential components of grit, has two primary sources: interest and purpose (2016). Within the context of grit, Duckworth defines purpose as "the intention to contribute to the well-being of others" (p. 146). Purpose, like vocation, is other-oriented. Duckworth makes the bold claim "that, for most people, purpose is a tremendously powerful source of motivation" (p. 148). Pink (2009) concurs with this claim, asserting that "the most deeply motivated people – not to mention those who are most productive and satisfied – hitch their desires to a cause larger than themselves" (p. 131). Pink describes human beings as "purpose seekers" (p. 132).

The spark for purpose is a personal driving interest in something (A. Duckworth, 2016). Purpose begins to develop when the individual could observe someone else who is purposeful, someone who lives his or her life out of a sense of purpose. Purpose further grows when the individual "discovers a problem in the world that needs solving" (p. 162) and then realizes that he or she can personally make a difference about that problem. Focusing a personal driving interest, as well as personal effort and energy, to make a difference for others in the family, the community, or the world is "a tremendously powerful source of motivation" (p. 148). This appears to be the case for many study participants.

Garber (2014) brings this life-cycle of the growth of purpose into the realm of vocation. He asserts that "all day, every day, there are both wounds and wonders at the very heart of life if we have eyes to see. And seeing is where vocation begins" (p. 35). Vocation takes on substance and meaning when we observe the world around us, understand the needs we see, the cries we hear, and then step into that world to do something about it. Garber confronts those who will listen with a compelling question: "Knowing what you know about yourself and the world, what are you going to do?" (p. 51). He then proceeds to lay out a question anyone can ask of himself or herself: "Seeing what I see, hearing what I hear, what am I going to do?" (p. 79).

The participants expressed a strong desire to serve others, help others, and share their knowledge. This is a key theme emerging from the analysis of study artifacts given that other-oriented topics were mentioned by study participants more frequently than any other topic that could be considered a motivational influence. As a group, study participants articulated a long list of varied others. Based on the composition of this list, it appears that study participants are observing the needs around them and desire to step in to meet those needs, beginning with their families.

The desire to serve God and others is a motivational influence driving some young Honduran women to pursue education and vocation. This leads to the sixth, and final, research conclusion: Purpose, played out in the desire to serve God and others, is a tremendously powerful source of motivation driving some young Honduran women to pursue education and vocation despite the barriers they face in the culture of rural Honduras.

**Research Applications**

Those who live in under-resourced communities anywhere in the world have similar needs and face similar barriers to those faced by study participants. This is especially true for girls and young women in many countries who also face gender discrimination and barriers to the pursuit of education and vocation. Findings from this study are applicable to individuals and

groups working with such young people in under-resourced communities in Honduras and in many other locations around the world. Three specific areas of application are discussed: role of an exemplar, importance of a proxy agent, and importance of encouragement.

**Role of an Exemplar**

Young people who grow up in under-resourced communities lack positive role models, especially role models who demonstrate a pursuit of education and vocation. Missionaries, members of volunteer teams participating in a short-term mission or medical assignment, and those who work in NGOs have an excellent opportunity to have a positive and lasting impact on young lives by stepping into the role of an exemplar, "a saint who formed an influential example" (Schuurman, 2004, p. 71). Anyone in any occupation can serve as an exemplar to a young person, given the desire to do so. As Schuurman (2004) points out, "By reflecting on especially exemplary mothers, friends, fathers, husbands, wives, carpenters, mechanics, pastors, and businesspeople, our sense of vocation can be sparked and deepened" (p. 71).

Purpose, like vocation, is other-oriented. The spark for purpose is a personal driving interest in something (A. Duckworth, 2016). Purpose begins to develop when the individual can observe someone else who is purposeful, someone who lives their life out of a sense of purpose. Missionaries, members of volunteer teams participating in a short-term mission assignment, those serving on a medical mission team, and those who work in NGOs as well as anyone else who serves young people can stimulate the growth of purpose in the life of a young person by openly living their lives out of a sense of purpose and explaining their purposeful life to willing young listeners.

**Importance of a Proxy Agent**

Young people who live in low socioeconomic status have limited resources and influence. They do not have connections or a network. Their parents and grandparents often do not have enough influence or experience to guide them in their pursuit of education and vocation or to open doors for them. These young people need someone to step in with the influence, connections, network, and experience to help them overcome the barriers they face.
Bandura (2001) speaks to the need that these young people have for someone to help them when they face discouragement and the other barriers that are inherent in the culture of under-resourced communities: In many spheres of functioning, people do not have direct control over the social conditions and institutional practices that affect their everyday lives. Under these circumstances, they seek their well-being, security, and valued outcomes through the exercise of proxy agency (p. 13).

Young people in under-resourced communities need someone with access to resources, experience, expertise, or influence to step in on their behalf to help them secure the "outcomes they desire" (Bandura, 2001, p. 13). A proxy agent is that special someone who will bring what they have and will intervene on behalf of young people to help open doors and overcome barriers on the path to education and vocation. As but one example, community leaders who encourage young women in rural Honduras to attend The Leadership Center and then serve as their recommenders are filling the role of a proxy agent.

A proxy agent who serves in the role with the intention of serving God and serving others is practicing "vocational stewardship" (Sherman, 2011, p. 20). Sherman (2011) describes vocational stewardship as "the intentional and strategic deployment of our vocational power-knowledge, platform, networks, position, influence, skills, and reputation – to advance foretastes of God's kingdom" (p. 20). Bringing vocational power to bear as a proxy agent to benefit young people in under-resourced communities is exciting and God-honoring work. This role is ideally

suited to missionaries, members of volunteer teams participating in a short-term mission assignment or on a short-term medical mission team, those who work in NGOs, and others who work with young people. A proxy agent, someone who practices vocational stewardship to benefit young people in under-resourced communities, is bringing hope to those who often lack hope. And, as Sherman correctly points out, "offering hope to those who feel hopeless is kingdom work" (p. 38).

**Importance of Encouragement**

Discouragement is an ever-present reality for children and young people in many places throughout the world. Discouragement is not limited to under-resourced communities. It is not only girls and young women who are confronted with discouragement. But girls and young women who live in cultures dominated by a machismo mindset live in a world filled with discouragement.

The participants offered suggestions on how best to communicate encouragement in ways that are helpful and that resonate within a culture characterized by discouragement. Some of these suggestions are discussed within Theme 6: encouragement is critical in a culture filled with discouragement for girls and young women. Missionaries, members of volunteer teams participating in a short-term mission assignment or on a medical mission team, those who work in NGOs, teachers, and others who work with young people are well-positioned to offer encouragement to those in need of encouragement. As Maxwell (2008) points out, "Everyone can become an encourager" (p. 48). Encouragement from an adult who listens carefully, asks questions thoughtfully, and tells a young person "you can do it" may make all the difference in the life of that young person. An active encourager listens, engages in conversation, and offers praise for effort and accomplishment. Garber (2014) provides a thought-provoking question that potential encouragers can ask themselves: "Seeing what I see, hearing what I hear, what am I going to do?" (p. 79).

**Suggestions for Further Research**

The purpose of the study was to discover and describe the motivational influences in the lives of students and graduates of The Leadership Center as they traveled a journey through high school to The Leadership Center in pursuit of a vocation in business, bilingual teaching, or serving with an NGO. This purpose implies two corollary questions: Why do some young Honduran women defy tradition, convention, and culture to pursue education and a vocation rather than following the cultural norm of bearing and raising children at a young age? What drives these young women forward when many simply follow the traditional path dictated by culture and gender? The study reported in this article seeks to answer these questions.

However, many young women are hindered by the cultural barriers. They are not able to overcome the barriers, and they give up their pursuit of education and vocation. What about those young women who make a choice to follow tradition, convention, and cultural norms, who choose to forgo education, and who remain in their communities and begin having children at a young age? What motivates them to take that path? The design of this study did not include that line of research. This is an important issue not only for rural Honduras but for other under-resourced regions of the world as well. One suggestion for further research is to modify the design of this study to investigate why many young women in rural Honduras choose not to continue their studies or pursue their dreams. What motivated those young women to remain in the traditional cultural role for women – begin having children at a young age, stay at home, take care of the children and the house, and work in low paying jobs in agriculture, cleaning houses,

or in a factory, if jobs are available? The results of such a study would be of use to many who serve in international relief and development roles.

There is a gap in the literature related to the impact that culture has on the pursuit of vocation and an understanding of how vocation and calling are defined and function with individuals in racial and ethnic groups other than Caucasians and in cultures and societies other than the United States. This article takes one step toward filling that gap, yet there is much more that can be learned by explicitly including the construct of culture in the design of studies focused on vocation and calling. Questions to be answered include: How does the cultural context influence the pursuit of vocation? What specific facets of culture serve as motivational drivers in the pursuit of vocation? How does culture influence the decisions that people make about the life directions they pursue? How are vocation and calling defined and understood by individuals in racial and ethnic groups other than Caucasians living in the United States? How does the concept of vocation function in other cultures? Such investigative studies would broaden the understanding of the vital topic of vocation and calling.

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